

"With Hidden Noise"¹

The name *Inges Idee* stands for an artistic strategy and praxis in which ideas and the conceptual proposal are primary tools.

Inges Idee consists of four people: Axel Lieber, Hans Hemmert, Thomas A. Schmidt and Georg Zey. Since 1992, based in Berlin, they have worked as a group on art projects in public places while at the same time working independently of each other as individual artists. With the political, economic, social and cultural changes in Berlin since the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the city has become a centre of contemporary art. *Inges Idee* has made a significant contribution to the development of site-specific art in Berlin and elsewhere and has for many years had an established position in the field of contemporary art.

Inges Idee is synonymous with a collaboration involving the input of four different artists. But what they finally produce is a symbiosis of the different impulses of THE idea of an, in this case, imaginary female person: 'Inge' - the mother of all ideas.

The numerous invitations to competitions cause the artists to take part in regular brainstorming sessions and intense discussions and debates. Ideas are produced in a manner that is comparable to an artistic laboratory. The artists experiment with the ideas, always testing their suitability as public art and then developing them into a concrete expressive concept. The material production of the work is initially a secondary consideration and is only undertaken in cases where the group is actually commissioned to produce a permanent installation on the site.²

The internal method of working employed by *Inges Idee* is both strongly process-oriented while at the same time being stringently concerned with spatiality. Several projects can thus be worked on in parallel and many of them finally realized. Concepts that are not used find their way back to the pool of ideas where they may be reactivated as elements of new proposals.

The designs produced by *Inges Idee* are always concerned with a specific place, existing architecture or an actual

spatial context. Their initial questions are deeply concerned with matters such as the social or urban context in which the competition venue is situated? What does it look like and what is its conceptual structure? What happens there? How, by whom and for what purpose will it be used? Should one intervene within the space or make use of the outer frame or should one create a completely new structure at the site?

With their poetical language, *Inges Idee* stretch the inner and outer limits and characteristics of public space, deconstructing its functional or pragmatic frame and filling the empty space with metaphorically heightened fragments or with figurative, episodic images.

Effective as an artistic commentary, on account of their captivating simplicity, are the 17 oversize magpies installed in 1999, in front of the Landeszentralbank in Berlin und Brandenburg (Potsdam, Germany) that happen to be laying siege to the bank. With the help of an allegory the artists playfully allude to the real object of society's desire which is to be found within the bank. The presence and intentions of the birds thus remain ambivalent: are they custodians and minders of the object of their longing or are they in the role of potential and expectant thieves?

The original idea of the architecture and the place have been sparingly retranslated and visually reformulated, thereby ironically treating the symbolic system of rules, giving them a new context and opening them to alienation.

On the square in front of the station in Linköping, an idea was brought to fruition in the same year. Here it is a matter of a subtle intervention and a transformation of the place using very sparing means. A simple streetlamp was permanently positioned in the middle of the station square. Around this are four round bollards placed like the basic positions of a clock, which function as benches to sit on. The lamp, which is regularly lit at night, revolves on its axis once a minute, 24 hours a day. With the rotating lamp which, probably for the first time, has here become the principle player on a stage, a surreal inversion takes place: one can count the minutes but the actual time is hidden. It is not the travellers who move here but the light of the lamp that wanders off, constantly returning to its starting point which is identical with its destination. The lamp speaks to

travellers and passers-by like an unobtrusive parable of time and, like a mythical, anachronistic relic to the unavailability of their movement within the loop of time: on their standing still and the infinite repetition of everything.

As with all artistic interventions by *Inges Idee*, this installation finds itself in the field of tension between the rejection of a specific connotation and suitability and the simultaneous promise of later enjoyment. This is also shown, for example, in the benches of 'Panorama' (Shizuoka, Japan) which vary greatly in size and the 'Long Bench' (The Orangery at Körnerpark in Berlin). Each of their works is equally an analysis of their own artistic praxis which, in a subtle and precise manner examines and renews the contemporary concept of sculpture, object and installation with regard to form and content. An explicit stylistic assignation is equally impossible: the hybrid character of their work with links to the traditions of Dadaism, surrealism, minimalism, conceptual or pop-art lead to an independent and, at the same time, recognizable style.

The 'Basketball pitch' created for the garden show in Potsdam in 2001 is synonymous with a sculptural concept that recurs in the work of *Inges Idee*: that of the organic, soft and rounded figure. The basketball pitch, which is the same size as a professional pitch, takes the actual topography of the site and spreads itself like an elastic membrane over the former military training ground with its irregularities. The surface of the usable pitch adapts itself intimately to the landscape, thus becoming a perfect negative of it. Closer to and yet simultaneously more distant from its traditional model, that of nature, the sculpture cannot come.

For their new project, the installation *On Tour*, the artists of *Inges Idee* have designed a group of five differently coloured sculptures in front of the main entrance of the concert hall in Vara. Placed as though for a classical, though temporary decoration of the site, their highly organic and abstract forms are reminiscent of Henry Moore or, for example, of the current work of the Australian artist Patricia Piccinini³. The hybrid and futuristic-seeming form of the sculptures as well as their shiny, polished surfaces invite one to use them as perfectly designed utilitarian seats.

The contours of the objects are similar to musical instrument cases, though they are not the orchestral instruments that one finds in a classical quintet. Here it is a matter of an unusual ensemble: a cement-mixing machine, a Vespa, a lawnmower, a motor saw and a garden shredder.

With this sculpture *Inges Idee* have produced a simulation of two ready-mades: that of domestic machines or tools and musicians' instrument cases. The first appear ready for use in everyday life, whereupon there is a seemingly meaningless but constantly audible composition and domestic background noise. The context of the concert hall in which the machines have been placed, lends them the appearance and the status of musical instruments which are merely waiting for their entries. Nothing more was required than a simple reversion to everyday existence for *On Tour* to generate another artistic example of (re)-contextualisation and a multiplicity of references.

Thus *Inges Idee* has opened up the field of the historical and contemporary synthetic insertion of the acoustical and visual starting material which stretches from the noise experiments of the Dadaists to the sound collages of avant-garde music of a John Cage or the Fluxus movement right up to the electronic club sounds and sound art of the likes of Rodney Graham, Henrik Håkansson or Sven Åke Johansson that are so celebrated in contemporary art. Under John Cage's motto of "Any sound is music" these acoustic performances and installations serve, for example, to distance themselves from traditional compositions, to turn away from conventional instruments and to exploit everyday objects and their sounds such as those from buckets, tractors, spades and chirping crickets. In this way *Inges Idee* refers to the extensive repertoire of the concert hall which, besides classical music, will also include experimental and avant-garde performances and rock concerts.

The closed, made-to-measure cases that surround the machines like shells, illustrate on a smaller scale the essential form and function of the concert hall: a perfectly designed and organically formed cover that acts as the shelter for the genesis and development of sounds and prevents disturbance from intrusive noise. Seen in relation to the concert hall, the instruments of *On Tour* with their closely fitted covers are symbolic of

the spatial action of the "wandering" tones and their acoustical sounds. It is only spatial design that makes music possible but the room, in turn, is transformed through the music played and becomes the resonator for the sounds.

Just as the concert hall makes the intrusion of noise impossible, so it also prevents the sounds from escaping. The machines in their cases are similarly under lock and key, seemingly paralyzed and reduced to silence. Not only does their actual appearance remain in the tight-fitting case but their sounds are also locked up. On the one hand the machine-instruments suggest the echo of the response of contemporary acoustic art, but on the other they represent the concept of silence and the silent composition such as Cage produced with his piece entitled 4'33". In this he instructed the pianist to sit at the piano for four minutes and thirty-three seconds without playing a note. While the audience waited in silence it was thrown back on itself and heard the noise that it created in the concert hall in the form of rustling, coughing and scraping feet.

With *On Tour, Inges Idee* renewed the aspect of the unexpected.

At the centre of music its opposite is released: the hidden sound, the silent performance is introduced. Though the putative music of the machines finds a formal and pictorial expression in the design of the instrument cases, the idea of silence has been thought through to its conclusion. It is first with the silence which allows the discovery of the rich imaginative potential and the diverse relationship between the existing place, the concert hall and the sculptural group, first with the imagination, the fiction and the utopias of the pupils and concert audiences that fill the inaudible, that *On Tour*, as a "pointless" artistic game, will be transposed into the well-tempered and tonally rich vibrations of the soundtrack of silence.

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Notes:

¹ The title refers to the similarly named fourth American ready-made by Marcel Duchamp from 1916 that consists of a ball of household string which is pressed together by two

square brass plates separated by four long screws. Without telling Duchamp, Walter Arensberg placed a small object inside the ball of string. If one shakes the ready-made the hidden noise is audible. Duchamp never knew nor wanted to know what was in the ball of string. (Calvin Tomkins, *Marcel Duchamp. Eine biographie*, Munich/Vienna 1999)

² This approach is comparable with that of Marcel Duchamp who once said of his work, "it was always the idea which came first, not the visual example". (Calvin Tomkins, *Marcel Duchamp. Eine biographie*, Munich/Vienna 1999)

³ Compare especially *Car Nuggets GL* (2001) by Patricia Piccinini, made of fibreglass and painted with conspicuously bright automobile lacquer.